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Appeals Court Backs CIA on Campus Secrecy

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The CIA may keep secret not only the names of American colleges where it has intelligence sources, but also those where it doesn't, a federal appeals court ruled yesterday.

The U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals here, upholding a lower court, rejected a student's request under the Freedom of Information Act for the CIA either to confirm or deny that it had covert contacts on any campus of the University of California.

"To admit that the CIA had such contacts at this university would allow foreign intelligence agencies to try to zero in and identify specifically what where the nature of those relationships or with whom," the court said.

But it also would be dangerous to order the CIA to deny whether it had a contact at a certain university, the court said. It noted the agency has received more than 125 requests for information on covert contacts at about 100 schools.

"If the agency were required to indicate those schools with which it had had no covert contact, the work of foreign intelligence bodies would obviously be much easier," the court said.

"They could and would concentrate their efforts on the remaining American colleges and universities, and their sphere of activity could be appreciably narrowed," the panel said.

The CIA has acknowledged it uses American academics and students at American schools as intelligence sources.

Some, who have traveled abroad or are experts in a particular field of study, are sought out for confidential information, advice or help in recruiting foreign intelligence sources, court papers said. The agency also has contacts for scientific and social research.